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The Vendramin Family by the skillful Titian (Tiziano)

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Abstract: This study presents some key points regarding the interpretation of Titian's painting *The Vendramin Familiy*.
Keywords: Ttian (Tiziano Vecellio), Vendramin Family, Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista.
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Titian, *The Vendramin Family,* The National Gallery – Inv.NG4452 (photo: wikimedia.org/Google Art Project).

In this composition, the influential Venetian Vendramin family converges on the reliquary of the True Cross, which was brought from the Holy Land in the 14th century and then entrusted to an ancestor of that family, in his capacity as guardian of the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista [Great Confraternity of Saint John the Evangelist].

In the representation of this reliquary, the metamorphosis of a Jewish *menorah* into a cross is perceptible, expressing the logic of the Judeo-Christian religion.

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The same principle can be observed in a painting by Vasco Fernandes, where St. Peter holds a key that is also a characteristic Jewish *yad*[1].

Vasco Fernandes, *St. Peter*, MNGV–Viseu (photo:wikimedia.org).

1 See Paulo Martins OLIVEIRA, *Vasco Fernandes e a chave de Pedro*, 2015 (online – academia.edu), collected in *Arte e Novidade em Portugal. Estudos* 2002-2016, p.89 (online – archive.org).

Regarding Titian's painting, it is an allegorical exaltation of the Vendramin family in the form of the three Magi visiting the death and resurrection of Christ as a rebirth (Nativity ≈ Resurrection, Jo.16:19-22).

Thus, the celestial altar symbolizes Mount Golgotha, where the eternal and divine Christ is flanked by the two criminals (Jo.19:18), i.e. the ephemeral candles[2].

The altar also represents the local tomb where Christ would be buried, which was owned by the benefactor Joseph of Arimathea (Jo.19:38-41), who is here interpreted by the senior Wise Man. Jesus will resurrect (be reborn) from this tomb, which is signaled by the subtle suggestion of the traditional vase of Mary Magdalene (a main figure in this transcendent moment, Jo.20:11-18)[3].

In conclusion, the skillful Titian uses the reliquary and the Gospel of the patron saint of the Scuola Grande to illustrate the physical and spiritual perpetuation of that Venetian family, here interpreting the Three Ages of Man[4] – from youth to adulthood and old age, and from there to resurrection in Christ.

2 A similar logic can be observed in the three top rods in Titian's *Portrait of Francesco Maria della Rovere*, Florence, Uffizi, Inv.1890/n.926.

3 Also representing baptism as the path to Salvation

4 In the same museum, and also by Ttitian, another version of this concept is the painting *An Allegory of Prudence* (The National Gallery, Inv.NG6376.